

An Analysis of English-language CV Resumes Submitted in Pursuit of a Japanese University Teaching Post.

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[Report from the Workface]

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Chris Pitts

Abstract

This college recently advertised, over the Internet, for a part-time teacher. We received a large number of applications in many different formats. This paper describes the range of those applications, details why most of them were not as effective as they could have been, and offers some suggestions for creating a more attractive and useful covering letter and CV resume. It also offers specific advice on sending a job application by email.

Background

Last year our junior college department (English Language and Literature) needed to replace a part-time teacher. Normally we would have asked our staff to recommend someone they knew personally, and we would have chosen a candidate or two to interview from among the names we received.

The "personal recommendation" route to a job is not confined to Japan.

However, in my experience working in tertiary education in this country—24 years and counting—it seems to be generally regarded as not just acceptable but preferable, and, according to my informal enquiries, is widely used.

On this occasion, though, due to the timing of the resignation, we were obliged to advertise the post, which we did on the "Jobs Available" page of the JALT website (1).

The job advertisement

The advert we placed gave brief details of the classes to be taught, the minimum qualifications and experience we required of the teacher we were looking for, and information about the contract and payment we were offering. Finally the advert asked for responses "by email in the first instance." (See Appendix.)

Expectations

As the person who was going to read, sort and shortlist the applications for the convenience of my colleagues, I was hoping for a short covering letter in the form of an email from each applicant, showing that they:

- a) had read the advertisement thoroughly;
- b) satisfied the criteria described in the advert; and
- c) were at best enthusiastic to work for us, but failing that, at least able and willing to fulfill the contract for its duration.

I was further expecting that each applicant would attach a concise, readable CV resume, preferably as a .pdf (Portable Document File). Although this institution is a long way from being the ideal "paperless office," I intended to print no more documents, and to make no more photocopies, than absolutely necessary. If I could shortlist the best three candidates for example, I could then print out and copy only the three sets of documents relevant to those candidates.

Since there is no shortage of advice available on the Internet on how to prepare an attractive CV resume, this did not seem to be an unreasonable hope. It was quickly dashed!

What we actually received (1): Some emails; some letters by post

We received 16 replies in a few days, but in a wide variety of styles and formats. The first eight replies, as well as replies number ten, 15 and 16 did come by email. Reply number nine, and replies 11 through 14, however, arrived unsolicited by post, although to be fair, two of them were preceded by an email. What is one to make of the fact that the applicant either did not read, or did not understand, the request to reply by email first? [Incidentally, not one of those who mailed in their applications included a stamped, addressed envelope.]

What we actually received (2): The covering letters

What is the function of a covering letter? Some applicants seem to believe it is to repeat the information on the CV resume. Some seem to feel that it is an opportunity to describe their approach to teaching language, or to share their love of Japanese culture, or their philosophy of life. Some seem to feel it is an opportunity to tell me that this covering letter is a covering letter in response to my advert, in other words, to state the bleeding obvious. Well, yes, thanks, but I have potentially a lot of these to read before I can go home, and none of them helps me to decide whether you might be the teacher we are

looking for.

What we actually received (3): The CV resumes

Photos: I was surprised that only four of the sixteen CV resumes I received included a photograph of the candidate. I was even more surprised that one of those four had chosen a police-line-up-style photo of himself, not simply unsmiling, which would have been OK, but positively glowering straight into the camera. Looking at that photo scared even me a little. Goodness knows how our students would react to that expression walking in to their classroom on day one!

Length: The CV resumes ranged in length from what I was hoping for, i.e. a clear, well-spaced page or two of relevant information, to what I was dreading, i.e. four and more pages in minute detail listing years of educational achievements and work history.

Relevant information: Or rather, lack of it.

Almost every one of the applications lacked at least one item of what I consider to be relevant information: address, date of birth, visa status, telephone number, and so on.

Some senders attached files with opaque file names, like "CVDW2014" . No doubt it was immediately recognizable to the sender as their own CV that they prepared the year before last, but as one of more than 16 CVs on my computer . . .

Anyhow, doesn't Kyoritsu deserve a bang up-to-date document?

Advice for candidates (1): Your covering letter

The covering letter should be less than one side of A4, and should be attractively laid out. My Google search for "How to write a cover letter for a job application" has just produced more than 2.2 million results in less than nine-tenths of a second. There is a lot of advice out there, and clearly not all of it is relevant to finding a teaching job in Japan. However, on trying to narrow it down, a Google search for "How to write a good cover letter for an English teaching job at a Japanese University" just returned even more results in the same fraction of a second! Life is short, especially when you get to my age, and so clearly we need to focus on essentials. Forget Google, read on.

Put yourself in the recruiter's place

In the current job market, you will certainly not be the only person who responds to that job advert. Depending on several factors (for example: Tokyo/not Tokyo, the ranking of the university, the nature of the classes), your set of documents could be one of dozens of sets that the recruiter has to read through in a limited time. They may have three piles:

"promising," "possible" and "waste bin."

According to The Guardian's website,

The first thing a potential employer sees in your job application is the cover letter. This doesn't just support your CV – it's an opportunity for you to stand out from the crowd and persuade the recruiter to put you through to the next round. (2)

For me "to put you through to the next round," I would want you to tell me *concisely* how your experience and qualifications make you the ideal candidate for *this* job—the job we have advertised—not just for teaching English in general. Your CV resume should provide the concrete information that I need in order to check your claims for myself (*see Advice for candidates (2): Your CV resume* below), and on which I can base questions at your possible interview.

The Gender Gap

It is widely believed that men are more willing than women to apply for jobs they are not 100% qualified for. This is often referred to as "the gender gap" or "the confidence gap."

Men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them (3).

In the last few years a large number of research papers and articles has been published describing this. Whether the effect is real or not, don't apologize for not having exactly the qualifications we are looking for, as more than one responder did. Be bold and positive about the qualifications and experience you *do* have.

Give yourself an advantage

If you can give me the impression that you actually *enjoy* teaching English at the tertiary level—that you are not just grinding through each day in order to pay the bills until your ideal job turns up—I am more likely to put your application on the "promising" pile.

Another plus would be some indication that you know or have taken the trouble to find out who we are and where we are, and explicit confirmation that you are free at the times we need you.

An invitation to contact you by telephone is also attractive to me; I'd much rather call and talk to you to fix an appointment for interview than do it via several emails. Let me know when I would be most likely to get through to you.

To have one or more spelling or grammar mistakes in your covering letter is not necessarily a deal-breaker, but be assured that it does create a suspicion that other aspects of your professional life, like your lesson planning or time-keeping, may also be

slapdash.

Given the fact that we are a women's university and college, we prefer to employ women teachers. Sadly, only two of the sixteen applicants in this study were women, which is probably a reflection on the current state of the job market. However, don't give up, men. If none of the other applicants were a woman (or if none of the women applicants were suitable), you'd be on a level playing field, so let us know about your experience, if any, of teaching English to women.

Advice for candidates (2): Your CV resume

Here again, there is more than enough free advice on the Internet; you just need to spend some time to sift through some of it. As far as I am concerned, the CV resume is an objective record of your academic achievements and work history. I don't need or expect it to be peppered with adjectives telling me how you excelled on your degree course, or what a wonderful team player you were when you taught English to the staff of the trading company. Neither a mission statement copied from the Internet, quotes from professional motivators nor waffle about your personal objectives will impress me. Concise and readable trump detailed and self-aggrandizing.

- * Get it down to one side of A4 if possible, two sides of A4 as a maximum. In order to achieve this kind of brevity, reducing the word count should take precedence over using a smaller font!
- * Use plenty of white space to help readability.
- * Include a photograph of yourself in formal attire. Smiling is good.
- * Use at least two columns: one for dates, one for places and other information.
- * There should be no gaps in the chronology. If you had a career break to have a child or children, include that information, please. If you had a stretch in prison, that is also of interest...
- * Naturally, if you've sent your application by email, I have a return email address for you, but it is useful that you also include it on your CV resume.
- * Your geographical address is also relevant: how far away from us do you live?
- * We also want to know your visa status and when it expires. We do not sponsor visas for part-time teachers, and so we need to be sure that you can work for us legally for the duration of your contract.
- * Include at least one telephone number. A mobile phone number is best, but if you only have a house phone, when are you likely to be home? These could be very useful if we want to contact you quickly.

*What is your nationality and first language? Although I hesitate to make nationality a criterion for hiring an English teacher—one of the best teachers we have ever employed during my years here spoke English as a second language, with a distinctive accent—this is Japan, after all!

* Date of birth. How old are you? We found out eventually that we could not even consider two of our applicants because of our own rule on the maximum age of people we can hire.

* List your professional publications (briefly!), any volunteer work you do, your personal interests, and your relevant skills (other languages you speak; computer software you can use).

* Make it clear that you can provide references if we want to take them up ("References available on request."), but you don't need to list them here.

Get a second opinion

After your first attempts to write your covering letter and CV resume, ask a friend, colleague or teacher to read them and give you feedback. Stress that you want them to be concise, easy to read, and attractive.

At a later stage in the process, probably at the end of a successful interview, we will ask you to complete our standard CV forms, in English and Japanese, anyway.

Internet-specific advice

*Internet communications are not private.

Unless you use some form of protection or encryption, your email or file can potentially be read by anyone. It can also be copied, pasted and forwarded, either by design or by accident.

*Social media are not private.

More than one of the applicants in this study inadvertently damaged their chances of ever being hired by this college when they posted—on a public online forum a while ago—negative comments about life in Japan, their dissatisfaction with teaching English in Japan, or their intention to leave Japan. It is very difficult to “clean up” your grumblings even if you change your mind and subsequently become highly motivated to excel in the classroom.

Summary

When applying for a university teaching job online, email your covering letter after having it checked by someone, and write a meaningful Subject line. 'Teaching job' and 'Your advertisement' are not specific enough.

Attach your CV as a .pdf, and give it a clear title.

[The initial release of .pdf by Adobe Systems was in 1993, more than twenty years ago, and it became open format in 2008, nearly eight years ago.]

Re-read the other suggestions above.

Good luck in getting to the "promising" pile!

Appendix - the job advert

Part-time instructor needed to teach three 90-minute classes on Friday afternoons. At least MA/MSc (pref. TESOL) or equivalent, three years' relevant experience, woman preferred. One-year renewable contract initially; could be route to a full-time post in future for a suitable candidate. Salary 70,000 to 90,000 JPY/mo., depending on age and qualifications.

Please reply by email initially to:

References

- (1) <http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/career-development-corner/jobs>
- (2) <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/covering-letter-examples>
- (3) <http://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2014/09/11/are-women-too-timid-when-they-job-search/#34dd47262f83>